



Diálogo

Volume 15 | Number 2

Article 12

2012

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Recommended Citation

Martínez, Erika M. (2012) "Poems from One Day My Hands Will Touch the Ceiling," *Diálogo*: Vol. 15 : No. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol15/iss2/12>

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Poems from *One Day My Hands Will Touch the Ceiling*

Erika M. Martínez

From New Jersey

It's Christmas time in Santo Domingo.
We expect your arrival before Noche Buena,
but we await for El Día de los Reyes,
caravans of camels with magi on their backs.
We'll see the parade without you in January heat
from a balcony above Avenida Mella
days after your departure.

As you open the door with luggage in tow
I race to the front screaming,
Papi, Papi, Papi.
Melissa and Francisco in my wake.
Your arms unfurl like wings
to the three of us; this
is your landing.

In the whirls of your welcome
uncle parks his car at the foot of our driveway,
Cousins run to him screaming,
Papi, Papi, Papi—echoes of our notes,
yet they see him every morning for breakfast;
watch him eat his favorite bread with honey
at home, only three miles away.

In days less than a week,
we collect moments together under our skin
as succulents collect water,
to survive the long dry spells.
When you return to New Jersey
we can only be consoled
by the coming of the kings.

For a Week

Awaken with bites from mosquitoes—
small flames on ankles for him to extinguish.
I run to their room, find he's no longer sleeping.
Warm sheets whisper, He was just here.

Mami, on her side, points to their bathroom.
I weave through the clutter spilling
from gray suitcases—familiar and hostile.
Surrounded by yellow tiles he stands
in white briefs, cream on his face.

My eyes quiver at the sight of his flesh,
anticipate lashings, but
he left his temper in New Jersey,

hanging in the closet between navy blue shirts; there
where impatience lies on the floor
next to steel-toed boots.
His smile welcomes me to the wall-length mirror.
In between strokes he speaks to my reflection,
asks about sleep and dreams
until his blade reveals
the last strip of hidden skin.

My heels scratch the unbearable itch.
As he dabs menthol across my welts
I describe a hatred for oatmeal.
I want eggs for breakfast, I say,
imagine them fried on my plate—
two suns in billowy clouds.

All right, he says.
Seven days: too short for discord.
We mend our lives together again
knowing the stitches will come undone
in a week.

Displacement

In New Jersey, I crossed urban lines
every day from West New York to Union City.
The gloomy Hudson replaced my malecón.
Summers—which I thought were eternal—shortened
by bitter winters that chapped my face.

I lingered between Lincoln Tunnel and George Washington
Bridge,
across the street from the projects
where I heard teenage girl screams
and passed by cemeteries daily lined with tombstones
that forced me to think of death with each dawn.

I stepped on weeds rising up to the sun
through the cracks in uneven sidewalks.
I was surrounded by concrete, gravel, brick, asphalt,
parks without grass littered with big wheels
which we dodged on roller skates bought from Goodwill.

My feet missed cool tiles
as they walked on green shag carpet mildewed
and torn linoleum mended with duck tape
to cover exposed wooden beams
that creaked underneath.

Don Armando's bodega next door warmed some winter

moments
 with chicharrones in between days without food
 when icy wind whirled through cracked windows covered
 in plastic,
 refreshed us in summer with quimalitos when raindrops
 evaporated
 as they met our dilapidated rooftop.

But soothing occasions like those were scattered
 in the *cojelo fiao* 'cause there's no more food stamps
 and *mañana, si Dios quiere, things will get better.*

